

# Thomas Jefferson and the Library of Congress

by Dumas Malone

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS WASHINGTON 1977

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## Foreword

The Library of Congress has always been a monument to Thomas Jefferson. But only lately has this fact been embodied in law and on a building of the Library. On September 21, 1976, pursuant to an act of Congress, a ceremony was held at the Library christening the building formerly known as "the Annex" with its proper name: The Thomas Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. The occasion, during the year which marked the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, was specially chosen to commemorate one hundred years of the American Library Association.

A leading participant in these events was Dumas Malone, author of the definitive biography of Thomas Jefferson. The essay published here on Jefferson's relation to the Library of Congress is a chapter from Professor Malone's work. The story will enlighten and encourage everyone to associate the name of the great Jefferson with that of our great Library. The readers of this essay, we hope, will go on to read more in Professor Malone's life of Jefferson, will reach out to other works on Jefferson and his time, and will be enticed to a more vivid and personal understanding of the intimate intertwining of the lives of our great men with the fortunes of our great institutions.

This essay is both a messenger and a symbol of the many meanings and missions of the Library of Congress since its founding in 1800. As the Library of Congress, this Library, more conspicuously than the national library of any other nation, proclaims a nation's belief that enlightenment—the free, unhampered, uncensored pursuit of knowledge—is essential to wise government and to the well-being of a people. The Congress, ever since adopting the Library of Congress in 1800, has declared this belief both by its generous support of the Library



and by its generous use of the Library. Thomas Jefferson showed that he shared this belief when he offered his personal library to the Congress at whatever price it named. Many Americans in high places objected—the 6,500 volumes, they said, offered more books than the Congress would ever need, there were many books in foreign languages, and ideas in these books were atheistical or subversive. By a narrow margin of only ten votes (as Malone recounts) the Congress voted to receive Jefferson's library.

Since then, the Library of Congress, growing into a great national library, has increasingly served statesmen and politicians, scholars, teachers, journalists, authors, artists, composers, librarians—all who want to learn or to create. The Congress has wisely encouraged the Library to enlarge its collections, to reach out to help the nation's libraries and their readers wherever they may be. By doing this we confirm our belief in Jefferson's principle that enlightened government requires an enlightened people. "Enlighten the people generally," he wrote, "and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day."

Jefferson's books became the foundation of the Library of Congress. But the most important legacy was the searching, out-reaching spirit of Jefferson himself. He insisted that no subject was alien to the Congress of a great republic. While no one believed more passionately in the special opportunities of this New World, no one was a more devoted citizen of the whole worldwide Republic of Letters. Jefferson's spirit directs us to become an example, an inspiration, and a resource for all Americans and for people everywhere who wish freely to pursue knowledge.

Dumas Malone's splendid *Jefferson and His Time*, from which he and his publishers have generously granted us permission to print this essay, admirably exemplifies this effort to enlighten our nation by a wider, deeper understanding of our history. In the Jefferson whom Malone recreates we can see the opportunities for greatness which our nation has offered us. In Malone's work, too, we see the opportunities given every generation to rediscover the nation's resources for greatness.

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN  
The Librarian of Congress

## Preface

This little story of a great private library, which became the nucleus of a greater public one, was intended and will one day serve as a chapter in a book. In due course, God willing, it will appear in the sixth and final volume of the biography of Jefferson on which I have been long engaged and to which my friend the Librarian of Congress has referred most generously. It was written during the summer of the Bicentennial year, when the name of the author of the Declaration of Independence was on so many lips, and it was finished shortly before the dedication of the building of the Library of Congress which now bears his name. I was pleased and honored by the request of the head of that illustrious institution that it be published separately as a memento of that occasion. I am happy for it to appear under such distinguished auspices.

The central figure in this story was a man of the woods and fields as well as the study, and he never ceased being deeply concerned for the welfare and happiness of human beings. The whole man is not and cannot be depicted here. But, to a notable degree, his books reflected the universality of his interests, and the Library of Congress stands as an enduring monument to his faith in knowledge. As Mr. Boorstin wisely says, Jefferson's greatest legacy to that institution and to his country was his own spirit.

DUMAS MALONE



Public letter from Thomas Jefferson to  
Samuel Harrison Smith dated September 21, 1814. Library of Congress  
Manuscript Division

Dear Sir

Monticello Sep. 21. 14.

I learn from the Newspapers that the Vandalism of our enemy has triumphed at Washington over science as well as the Arts, by the destruction of the public library with the noble edifice in which it was deposited. of this transaction, as of that of Copernicagen, the world will entertain but one sentiment. They will see a nation suddenly withdrawn from a great war, full armed and full handed, taking advantage of another whom they had recently forced into it, unarmed, and unprepared, to indulge themselves in acts of barbarism which do not belong to a civilized age. When Van Ghent destroyed their shipping at Chatham, and De Ruyter rode triumphantly up the Thames, he might in like manner, by the acknowledgement of their own historians, have forced all their ships up to London bridge, and there have burnt them, the tower, & city, had these examples been then set. London, when thus menaced, was near a thousand years old, Washington is but in it's teens.

I presume it will be among the early objects of Congress to recommence their collection. This will be difficult while the war continues, and intercourse with Europe is attended with so much risk. you know my collection, it's condition and extent. I have been 50 years making it, & have spared no pains, opportunity or expence to make it what it is. While residing in Paris I devoted every afternoon I was disengaged, for a summer or two, in examining all the principal bookstores, turning over every book with my own hands, and putting by every thing which related to America, and indeed whatever was rare & valuable in every science. besides this, I had standing orders, during the whole time I was in Europe, in it's principal book-marts, particularly Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Madrid and London, for such works relating to America as could not be found in Paris. so that, in that department, particularly, such a collection was made or probably can never again be effected; because it is hardly probable that the same opportunities, the same time, industry, perseverance, and expence, with some knowledge of the bibliography of the subject would again happen to be in concurrence. during the same period, and after my return to America, I was led to procure also whatever related to the duties of those in the high concerns of the nation. so that the collection,

Samuel H. Smith esq.



which I suppose is of between 9 and 10,000 volumes, while it includes that which would  
 be the American literature, in the diplomatic and parliamentary branches, it is particularly  
 standard full. It is long since I have been sensible enough not to continue private  
 property, and had provided that, after death, Congress should have the refusal  
 it, at their own price. but the hope they have now incurred makes the present, in  
 proper moment for their accommodation, without regard to the small remainder of time  
 and the barren use of my energy, it. I ask of your friendship therefore to make for  
 me the lender of it to the library committee of Congress, not knowing myself of whom  
 the committee consist. I inclose you the catalogue, which will enable them to judge  
 of its contents. nearly the whole are well bound, and some of them elegantly, and  
 of the latest editions existing. They may be valued by persons named by themselves,  
 and the payment made convenient to the public. it may be for instance in such amount  
 in thousands as the Law of Congress has left at their disposal, or in stock of any ~~kind~~ of  
 their late loans, or of any loan they may wish to make at this session, so as to spare the  
 present calls of our country, and avoid its days of peace and prosperity. They may  
 order nevertheless into immediate use of it, as is a no expense would place it in Washington  
 in a single trip of a fortnight. — I should be willing indeed to return a few of the books  
 to answer the time I have yet to pass, which might be valued with the rest, but ~~the~~  
 not included in the sum of valuation until they should be returned at my death which  
 I would carefully provide for, so that the whole library, as it stands in the catalogue  
 at this moment should be theirs, without any parting. From I should like to return  
 would be chiefly classical and mathematical, some few in other branches, & particular  
 early one of the five encyclopedias in the catalogue, but this, if not acceptable, would  
 not be urged. I must add that I have not visited the library since I came home to live,  
 so that it is probable some of the books may be missing, except in the chapters of Law  
 and divinity which have been revised, and stand exactly as in the catalogue.  
 The return of the catalogue will of course be needed, whether the return be accepted  
 or not. I do not know that it contains any branch of science which Congress would

with to exclude from their collection, there is in fact no subject to which a member of  
 Congress may not have occasion to refer. but such a wish would not correspond with  
 my views of preserving it's disimbursement. my desire is either to place it in their  
 hands entire, or to preserve it to me. I am engaged in making an alphabetical  
 index of the authors named to be annexed to the catalogue in order to facilitate the  
 finding their works in the catalogue, which I will forward to you as soon as completed.  
 any agreement you shall be so good as to take the trouble of entering into with the  
 committee, I hereby confirm. Accept of the assurance of my great esteem and  
 respect.

Thos. Jefferson



## THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

As HIS SERVANT Isaac observed, Old Master had an abundance of books and was always looking things up in them.<sup>1</sup> When Thomas Jefferson was an eager young student in Williamsburg, books had begun to unlock for him the vast treasure-house of human knowledge, and the process of acquisition into which he then entered was to cease only with his life. In his rural canton he had only his own library to rely on, and the loss of his first collection by fire at Shadwell when he was twenty-seven was a heavy blow. That library consisted mostly of lawbooks, but George Wythe had commended to him the works of classical writers as well as those of legal luminaries, and these must have been well represented in his first collection as they were to be in his last. He estimated the monetary value of his lost books as £200, and for a young lawyer in that era his collection was doubtless a creditable one. Within a dozen years, however, he had replaced it many times over.

When he was nearing forty he had 2,640 volumes, according to his own report. Besides becoming a regular purchaser from dealers, he had acquired the libraries of Richard Bland and Peyton Randolph, senior statesmen of his province who were distant kinsmen of his. His collection of Virginia laws was already notable, and he had procured writings of other sorts from private libraries such as those of the Reverend Samuel Henley of the College of William and Mary and William Byrd

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Jefferson, *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave, As Dictated to Charles Campbell in the 1840's by Isaac, One of Thomas Jefferson's Slaves*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Charlottesville: Published by the University of Virginia Press for the Tracy W. McGregor Library, 1951). Republished in James A. Bear, Jr., ed., *Jefferson at Monticello* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), p. 12.



of Westover. By March 6, 1783, he had made a catalog of his library, following a system of classification based upon the faculties of the mind as set forth by Francis Bacon. One of the most systematic of men, he was in character as a cataloger, and in arranging his books he may have found solace for the death of his wife, which occurred about six months sooner.<sup>2</sup>

This was just about the time his mansion was completed in its first form—a form it was to retain for another decade, until the master began the remodeling that was to last virtually until his retirement from the presidency. In the first house the library was in the room on the second floor just above the parlor. This fitted the collection snugly but not uncomfortably until that was swollen by a flood of books from France.

For three decades Jefferson continued to add titles to the catalog of 1783, though he occasionally neglected to list something he had bought. He eagerly availed himself of the marts of the Old World during his ministry in France and maintained for the rest of his life close contact with booksellers, both at home and abroad. He may be described not improperly as a compulsive buyer, but he was generally a careful one. He had a keen eye for bindings but made no point of first editions. He designated himself as a bibliomaniac and his tastes were catholic. While in Paris he bought for himself, as for his friend Madison, books that were “old and curious or new and useful.”<sup>3</sup> To him books were tools; they were storehouses of knowledge and wisdom to which his curious mind could repair; they were friends to turn to, as to his red fields and his beloved family.

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<sup>2</sup> This catalog, a bound volume originally consisting of blank pages on which Thomas Jefferson (hereafter referred to as TJ) wrote, is in the Coolidge Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. It is referred to briefly in Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), pp. 401–2. The doctoral dissertation of William H. Peden, “Thomas Jefferson, Book-Collector” (University of Virginia, 1947) deals with all of his libraries. The monumental compilation by E. Millicent Sowerby, *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, 5 vols. (Washington: Library of Congress, 1952–59) deals in extraordinary detail with the one he sold to Congress.

<sup>3</sup> See Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and the Rights of Man* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), p. 87. In “Thomas Jefferson and His Library,” E. M. Sowerby, while recognizing TJ as a bibliomaniac, denies him the title of bibliophile. Bibliographical Society of America, *Papers* 50 (1956), p. 217. This of course is largely a matter of definition, but quite clearly he was more concerned about the contents of books than he was for show.

During the long years when he was rebuilding his house his books must have been out of sight for part of the time at least, and we may doubt if any considerable number of his countrymen were really aware of the size and scope of his library. Also, we may wonder just where he found room for it when the house was done and he was at home to stay. He did not know precisely how many volumes he had then, but he figured in 1815 that they took up 855.39 square feet of wall space and that the cases occupied 676 cubic feet altogether.<sup>4</sup> To find that much wall space in his personal wing of the house one must include virtually the whole of it except for his chamber. His cabinet, which was separated from the chamber by his bed, seems to have been lined with books, and, besides filling all the wall space in what is now known as the book room and in the passageway to it, these must have overflowed into what was afterwards called Martha Randolph's sitting room.<sup>5</sup>

Margaret Bayard Smith, on a visit to Monticello in 1809, was honored by the invitation to visit what she called her host's sanctum sanctorum, but she admitted disappointment at the appearance of the library. With its “numerous arches and divisions” it was less impressive, she said, than it would have been in one large room.<sup>6</sup> As the front hall was a veritable museum, the eastern end of the house must have been a forest of book-cases. Jefferson does not appear to have said so, but there is little doubt that his library had considerably outgrown its quarters.

Although he guarded these rooms jealously, he had permitted a trusted young friend to use his library in his absence and he was characteristically generous with his books.<sup>7</sup> There was probably no time when some of them were not loaned out. It is impossible to determine just when he reached the conclusion that

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<sup>4</sup> The figures are in his observations on the transportation of his library, William Dawson Johnston, *History of the Library of Congress*, vol. 1, 1800–1864 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> The total wall space thus arrived at would have been only barely adequate. Some books that were in a closet in 1806 may have still been there in 1815.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), pp. 71–72.

<sup>7</sup> He granted this privilege to James Ogilvie, who had a school in Milton. His letter of January 31, 1806, contains much information about the arrangement of his books. TJ, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul L. Ford, 10 vols. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1892–99), 8:417–19.



such a collection should be in public rather than private hands, but toward the end of his first presidential term he said that if a university should be established in his state on a worthy plan, he would leave his books to that institution.<sup>8</sup> Hope of a university was deferred, however, and in the meantime he must have concluded that his financial circumstances would not permit him to be that generous. Before the fall of 1814 he was already thinking of offering his books to Congress in his will—that is, of offering that body the option of acquiring his library at their own price. Circumstances occasioned him to do this sooner.

The financial relief that he gained as a result was temporary, but, through the institution to which he committed his cherished books, this Apostle of Enlightenment made a lasting as well as a highly distinctive contribution both to his own country and to civilization. He never claimed that he founded the Library of Congress, but the institution that emerged from the ashes after the war was virtually his creation.

When the government of the young Republic moved from Philadelphia to the wilderness village of Washington, a special collection of books for the use of the senators and representatives became a necessity. One was started in 1800, toward the end of John Adams's presidency, and the little library got under way during that of Jefferson with the benefit of his counsel regarding acquisitions.<sup>9</sup> The collection consisted of perhaps 3,000 volumes when the British invaders destroyed it in the late summer of 1814. Learning of this action from the newspapers, the ex-president described it as the triumph of vandalism over knowledge itself. He promptly offered to sell to Congress his own library, which turned out to be more than twice the size of the one that was lost. The moment seemed opportune, not merely because he needed the money (a consideration he did not mention) but also because Congress could not easily replace its losses by shipments from Europe while the war was still going on, and probably could acquire no such a collection as his anyway.

<sup>8</sup> TJ to Littleton W. Tazewell, January 5, 1805, Jefferson Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. See Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Johnston, *History of the Library*, especially pp. 23–37.

These things and more he said in a letter to Samuel Harrison Smith, former publisher of the *National Intelligencer* and then commissioner of revenue, asking that old friend to pass the offer on to the chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library, of whose identity he himself was not aware. He intended this letter to be made public, as it was, and with it he sent a catalog of his collection as he supposed it then stood.<sup>10</sup> In a covering letter, admitting some anxiety, he asked Smith to inform him of the intentions of the committee as soon as he could form a conjecture regarding them. Three days later, in letters dealing chiefly with other matters, he informed his friends the president and the secretary of state what he had done.<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Milligan, a bookseller in Georgetown with whom Jefferson was accustomed to do business, was also in his confidence. Apparently Milligan had made a recent visit to Monticello and had discussed this prospective transaction with his host at that time. After doing so with James Monroe in Washington, presumably on his own initiative, he reported that Jefferson's "truly magnanimous" offer would be very acceptable. Milligan offered to arrange the books without charge but did not want the post of Librarian of Congress.<sup>12</sup>

The prospects of Jefferson's truly magnanimous proposal were far from unclouded, however. His offer was not formally accepted for four months, and at times its fate hung by a hair. The Joint Committee on the Library acted expeditiously and appears to have been favorably disposed at all times. The chairman, Senator Robert H. Goldsborough of Maryland, submitted to the Senate on October 7 a resolution authorizing the committee to make a

<sup>10</sup> This catalog has not been discovered, but presumably it corresponded in the first place to the catalog now in the Massachusetts Historical Society. TJ made a copy of this in 1812 and added titles as late as 1814. See Sowerby, *Catalogue*, 1: ix.

<sup>11</sup> Both of TJ's letters to Samuel Harrison Smith, September 21, 1814, are in the Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. The public letter is printed in TJ, *Writings*, ed. Ford, 9:485–88, and elsewhere. TJ to Madison, September 24, 1814, is in TJ, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington: Issued under the auspices of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904–5), 14:196. TJ to Monroe, September 24, is in TJ, *Writings*, ed. Ford, 9:488–89.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Milligan to TJ, September 24, 1814, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. It seems unlikely that he could have seen TJ's letter of September 21 to S. H. Smith by this time, and internal evidence suggests that he had not.



contract with Jefferson for the purchase of his library and this was adopted without dissent on October 10. In the House the resolution encountered some difficulty, however, and it was amended on October 19 so as to require congressional ratification of any agreement that should be reached. This requirement, in which the Senate concurred the next day, seemed neither unnatural nor improper, but it meant that the sale would be delayed and might be prevented.<sup>13</sup>

Hardly any of the members of Congress had ever seen the library at Monticello, and most of those who were aware of its existence probably had no real idea what it contained. But Jefferson's letter to Smith, the catalog made by his own hand that he sent with it, and an alphabetical list of authors that he dispatched a little later—all these were open to the perusal of the representatives during the nine days that the Senate resolution of October 10 was pending in the House.<sup>14</sup> The titles and names had to be left to speak for themselves in diverse tongues, but in his letter Jefferson spoke of and for the collection as a whole.

He sought to demonstrate its distinctiveness by describing his extraordinary efforts in its behalf while abroad. For months he haunted the shops of Paris, looking particularly for books relating to the New World; and he had standing orders for such works with booksellers in other major centers of the Old World. He believed that no comparable collection, relating to America, would ever be made, since it was highly unlikely that "the same opportunities, the same time, industry, perseverance and expense, with some knowledge of the bibliography of the subject" would happen to concur.<sup>15</sup> So far as he and his contemporaries could anticipate the future, this was not an unreasonable conjecture, and his claims for his collection of Americana have been conceded by experts from that day to this.

They were strongly supported that winter by one of his

<sup>13</sup> Discussions, with votes and texts of resolutions, October 11–20, 1814, in U.S. Congress, *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, 13th Cong., 3d sess. (Washington: Printed and published by Gales and Seaton, 1854), pp. 23–26, 29–30; Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 72–78.

<sup>14</sup> TJ to Smith, October 11, 1814, sending alphabetical list, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>15</sup> TJ, *Writings*, ed. Ford, 9:486.

knowledgeable young visitors from Boston. Francis C. Gray described it as "without a question the most valuable in the world." His companion, George Ticknor, who afterwards helped Jefferson so much in the replacement of classical works, made a different and more amusing comment on the library at this time. It seemed to him that "the most curious single specimen—or, at least, the most characteristic of the man and expressive of his hatred of royalty"—was a collection of memoirs which he had recently had bound in six volumes as *The Book of Kings*. The satisfaction he took in these "documents of regal scandal" may doubtless be attributed to the fervid republicanism of this collector of Americana.<sup>16</sup>

Unquestionably a pioneer in that field, he had picked up many a choice item abroad—such, for example, as Theodor de Bry's *The Great or American Voyages*, Parts I–XI, in Latin (1590–1619), which he acquired in Amsterdam for twelve guineas, and *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (2d ed., 1614), which he seems to have procured in London at the bargain price of four shillings.<sup>17</sup> His classification of the latter work under American geography suggests where his interest lay. But he had books on exploration in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian, and he could hardly have expected the interest of many of his countrymen in the subject to extend that far.

He said he had been equally diligent in procuring books that bore on the public affairs of his country. Accordingly, he claimed that his library extended particularly to whatever concerned the American statesman, being especially full in parliamentary and diplomatic matters. His claim was well-founded. There were far more volumes in the section dealing with politics and commerce than in any other—1,309 altogether. But his was a general, not a specialized professional, library. It was created in the spirit

<sup>16</sup> For details about the work, see Sowerby, *Catalogue*, 1:181–82. The comments of Gray and Ticknor can be conveniently seen in Francis Coleman Rosenberger, ed., *Jefferson Reader: A Treasury of Writings about Thomas Jefferson* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1953), pp. 80, 83.

<sup>17</sup> These titles can be seen on adjoining pages in Sowerby, *Catalogue*, 4:166–67. In "Some Notes concerning Thomas Jefferson's Libraries," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 1 (July 1944):272, William Peden describes TJ as a trailblazer especially in the field of Americana and philology. For suggestive comments see Sowerby, "Thomas Jefferson and His Library," and Frederick R. Goff, "Jefferson the Book Collector," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 29 (January 1972):32–47.



of eighteenth-century universalism, as indeed were those of other gentlemen of Virginia like Peyton Randolph. But he had distinctive interests, and his collection ranged far beyond theirs in comprehensiveness. There could not fail to be books in it that some legislator would see no need for. Yet he was entirely unwilling for his library to be divided. He would have preferred to keep some of the books, but he made no point of that and he specifically stipulated that Congress must take the whole of it or none at all. "I do not know," he said, "that it contains any branch of science [knowledge] which Congress would wish to exclude from their collection; there is, in fact, no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer."<sup>18</sup> That was an effective observation to make to the legislators themselves, but quite clearly he envisaged an institution covering the entire field of human knowledge and designed to serve learning as well as legislation.

## II

THE RESPONSE to the ex-president's offer by the various members of Congress was a more accurate reflection of their politics than their learning. In the House of Representatives, Federalist graduates of Yale, Brown, Columbia, and Harvard took the lead in opposing the Senate resolution, and hardly a member of their party in Congress favored the purchase at any stage.<sup>19</sup> Some Republicans joined their political rivals in support of amendments to the Senate resolution that were designed to defeat its purpose. One would have authorized the joint committee to negotiate for a library without specifying this one. Another called for the selection of suitable books from Jefferson's collection, implying that it contained unsuitable works and disregarding his statement that it might not be divided. Still another stipulated that the cost should not exceed \$25,000, which in fact it did not do.

In that time of financial stringency at the end of the war some objection to the purchase on grounds of economy was to

be expected, and the claim that Congress did not really need all of those books was not surprising. But one can scarcely justify the objections of supposedly enlightened men to this collection because it contained the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, and John Locke. The comment of a Washington correspondent of a Boston paper reflected this attitude: "The grand library of Mr. Jefferson will undoubtedly be purchased with all its finery and philosophical nonsense."<sup>20</sup>

This was after the House had defeated all of the crippling amendments and had adopted one calling for congressional ratification of any agreement the joint committee should enter into. Though introduced by the chief Federalist spokesman against the purchase at this stage, Thomas J. Oakley of New York, it could not have been objected to on principle by any member of the legislative body that was supposed to hold the purse strings. From the point of view of the opposition, no doubt, this was a delaying action, but the committee was authorized to proceed with negotiations for this particular library as a whole. Federalist diehards in the Senate registered their disapproval, but they were overwhelmed by a 3 to 1 margin.<sup>21</sup>

Since the joint committee was already on record as favoring the purchase, the main problem now before them was that of determining the price. Jefferson had taken the position in the beginning that this should be set by Congress, not by him, and had expressed his willingness to accept payment in such form and at such time or times as would be most convenient to the government. He had supposed that some person or persons would be sent to Monticello to value his library. He was willing to be bound by any estimate arrived at in this way or any other that the representatives of the government should prescribe. Furthermore, he recognized that this estimate might be rejected by either the committee or by Congress. But the committee, seemingly embarrassed by its responsibility, pressed Smith for a proposition.

Jefferson, who was trying to be entirely passive in this matter, had no desire to present one and was in no position to make an

<sup>18</sup> TJ, *Writings*, ed. Ford, 9:487.

<sup>19</sup> David C. Mearns, in *The Story up to Now: The Library of Congress, 1800-1946* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1947), pp. 18-20, points out the academic connections of the chief debaters.

<sup>20</sup> *Boston Gazette*, October 27, 1814, quoted by Johnston, *History of the Library*, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> The various resolutions with the votes on all of them are in Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 72-78, in virtually the language of *The Debates and Proceedings*.



estimate anyway, he said, since he did not have the catalog. Accordingly, he passed the problem on to Milligan. He asked that obliging man to make an accurate count of the books listed, distinguishing between them as to size, and to report the figures to Smith, who could use them as the basis of an estimate. The rate per volume was actually suggested by Milligan, who was busily engaged in counting the titles while Jefferson was on a fortnight's visit to Poplar Forest. When that gentleman returned to Monticello in mid-November he learned that he owned some 6,500 volumes which were worth more than \$24,000 on the scale of valuation that the bookseller was following: namely, ten dollars for a folio, six for a quarto, three for an octavo, and one for a duodecimo. He was entirely willing to accept this figure as a maximum.<sup>22</sup>

As reported to Congress the number of volumes was 6,487 and the value was \$23,950.<sup>23</sup> From Jefferson's point of view, the language of the committee was unfortunate, though he does not appear ever to have said so. There was no reference to the appraisal by a competent outsider, which had actually been made. Furthermore, the statement that "precise terms" had been received from Jefferson's "agent" tended to make him seem less passive and less generous in the matter of valuation than he really was.<sup>24</sup>

No one at that time could have been expected to anticipate the great monetary value that would be attached to such a collection a century and a half later.<sup>25</sup> Contemporary judgments

<sup>22</sup> This story is told more fully in the letters of Smith to TJ, October 21, 1814; TJ to Milligan, October 29; TJ to Smith, October 29; Milligan to TJ, November 16 (Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 80-84); TJ to Milligan, November 24, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. TJ still had the catalog now in the Massachusetts Historical Society. Because of interlineations and insertions, however, it would have been very difficult to use. He afterward expressed great need of the "fair copy."

<sup>23</sup> Miss Sowerby says she was never able to determine whether the figures used in this transaction referred to the number of titles or volumes ("Thomas Jefferson's Library," p. 214). I am assuming that the references are to volumes.

<sup>24</sup> Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 84-85

<sup>25</sup> In 1971, Frederick R. Goff, then chief of the Rare Book Division, Library of Congress, stated that fifteen years earlier he had submitted a list of eleven titles from TJ's library to a number of bookmen for appraisal and that the value assigned approximated the amount paid for the entire collection in 1815. "Jefferson the Book Collector," p. 35.

sharply reflected political and personal attitudes. While the original resolution was pending in the House, Jefferson's proposal was ridiculed in a Federalist paper as an attempt, which might well be emulated by other elderly gentlemen, to turn useless books into cash. Before Congress took final action the ex-president's friend, Dr. William Thornton, advised members of that body to offer him \$50,000 without further ado. Subsequently, a friendly commentator went so far as to assert that Parliament would have gladly given £50,000 for such a collection. Another supporter of the sale contented himself with the declaration that the library was worth twice what was asked for it. He was indulging in speculation, to be sure, but there appears to be merit in the claim that the government was offered a bargain.<sup>26</sup> To booklovers of a later day the most meritorious of all contemporary comments perhaps was the observation of a reader writing to the *National Intelligencer* that valuation of such a library was "absurd and impossible." Saying that he knew it well, he described it as unique—a library which "for its selection, rarity and intrinsic value, is beyond all price."<sup>27</sup>

About ten days after Milligan suggested to Jefferson what the approximate price should be, the joint committee got around to considering it. They quickly accepted the bookseller's final calculation and on December 3, 1814, a bill authorizing the purchase of the library was passed by the Senate without debate. The House did not act on it until January 26, 1815, and the bill was not approved until the thirtieth. During this interval Jefferson heard nothing from Smith, but he does not appear to have been perturbed. Milligan wrote him that ten wagons would be enough to transport the books, and before he received word that Congress would buy them he was talking of his desire to arrange them.<sup>28</sup> Apparently he did not realize how precarious the situation in the House of Representatives really was.

The offer which Milligan thought so generous, and which Jefferson regarded as timely, barely escaped rejection. A motion by Joseph Lewis, a Federalist congressman from his own state, that

<sup>26</sup> Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 89-95.

<sup>27</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer*, November 16, 1815. Quoted by Johnston, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Milligan to TJ, December 14, 1814; TJ to Smith, January 30, 1815, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.



consideration of the bill should be indefinitely postponed was defeated by only four votes. Another, that it be postponed to March 4, was defeated by only six. Almost as much support was given a more humiliating motion by Cyrus King of Massachusetts. This would have authorized the joint committee, on receipt of the library Jefferson had spent so many years in collecting, to select from it the books that were suitable and to sell the rest. The final vote on the bill authorizing the purchase of the collection as a whole was 81 to 71.<sup>29</sup>

A modern analyst of this vote as observed that, instead of being regarded as "a triumph of the children of light over the powers of darkness," it should be recognized as a narrow victory of the administration over the opposition.<sup>30</sup> It is uncertain just what Madison and Monroe did to further this legislation, if indeed they were in position to do anything much at this juncture, but their support of it may be assumed; and the record shows that the Federalists opposed it, almost to a man. Among those voting in the negative were Timothy Pickering, of whom partisan bigotry was to be expected, and Daniel Webster, who had not yet emerged as a champion of nationalism but was still in a provincial stage. In no section was the opposition so great as in New England, and the bitterest of all the speakers seems to have been Cyrus King of Massachusetts. According to the unsympathetic report in the *National Intelligencer*, he said he was "opposed to a general dissemination of that infidel philosophy" and the principles of a man who had inflicted more injury on the country than anybody else except Mr. Madison. The books for which money was to be put into Mr. Jefferson's pocket were described by this well-educated spokesman of High Federalism as "good, bad, and indifferent, old, new, and worthless, in languages which many can not read, and most ought not." The whole transaction was in "true Jeffersonian, Madisonian philosophy, to bankrupt the Treasury, beggar the people, and disgrace the nation."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> January 26, 1815, U.S. Congress, *Debates and Proceedings*, pp. 1105-6. The measure was approved January 30 (*Daily National Intelligencer*, February 4).

<sup>30</sup> Mearns, *The Story*, p. 24. This historian of the Library of Congress tabulates and analyzes the votes, pp. 21-25. He designates members of the party of the administration as Democrats, whereas I am continuing to call them Republicans.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Johnston, *History of the Library*, p. 86. The debate was more favorably reported from the Federalist side by the *New York Evening Post*, January 31, 1815, *ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

Although it may be presumed that the Federalists would have opposed the bill under almost any circumstances, the arguments against it appealed to a considerable number of Republicans. Among the fifteen members of the majority who voted in the negative was the veteran Nathaniel Macon, a sincere advocate of economy in all fields. By this time the legislators knew that the prospect of successful negotiations at Ghent had improved, but news of neither the treaty of peace nor Jackson's victory at New Orleans had yet reached Washington. The financial problems of the country were far from solution—a fact of which no one was more aware than Jefferson. It could certainly be argued sincerely that, at such a time, money was needed for other things much more than for what then seemed a big library. The large vote for postponement of this question is far from inexplicable. But, as viewed by posterity, the basic question was that of the character of the library.

The legislators could not have proceeded indefinitely without books, but if this particular collection had not been offered and accepted, we may wonder if Congress would soon, or ever, have set up one of comparable scope. This was a general, not a narrowly professional, library and, by acquiring it, Congress laid the foundations of a great national institution, destined to rank with the Bibliothèque nationale and the British Museum. Most of the legislators may have continued to think of it as their own particular possession, but it could and did serve a larger clientele and a wider purpose. Their final vote may have been determined primarily by political considerations, and we cannot ascertain the number who shared Jefferson's vision; but the legislators well deserve the gratitude of posterity for what they brought about.

### III

ON FEBRUARY 5, 1815, nearly five months after he offered his library to Congress, Jefferson learned of the official approval of the purchase and received a copy of the bill.<sup>32</sup> This was during

<sup>32</sup> Smith to TJ, January 30, 1815, received February 5, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.



the brief visit of George Ticknor and Francis Gray, when he was also informed of the victory at New Orleans and became aware of the destruction of his mill-dam by flood.<sup>33</sup> He seemed imperturbable in the midst of these important events and appears to have drawn up no private balance sheet of loss and gain. Payment for his library was to be made to the full amount in treasury notes, but he declined to receive it as yet. When asked just how he wanted these notes made out, he replied that they should not be made out at all until the books had been or were ready to be delivered. They had to be arranged and that was a task that he alone could perform. It would require him to be on his legs the whole time, he said, and he did not know how long they would hold out. He thought perhaps the work could be done in a fortnight but hoped the people in Washington would be patient.<sup>34</sup> In fact they were in no hurry. Nearly a month elapsed before Congress passed a supplementary measure, authorizing the president to select a suitable chamber for the library and to provide for its transportation. Smith reported a recommendation of Madison that the actual removal be delayed until May.<sup>35</sup>

In their arrangement Jefferson's books followed the order of his catalog.<sup>36</sup> When seeking information he sometimes had a score of them around him, as his servant Isaac had observed. Mrs. Smith reported that he had several hundred of his favorites in his cabinet, and no doubt these came from various sections. It is hard to believe that this exceedingly systematic man ever let his books get into serious disarray or was often unable to lay hands on one he wanted, but he had not reviewed the entire collection for a score of years. He was now seeking to put it in perfect order, and for this he needed his catalog.

He did not get that back until the middle of March, but he probably did some "arranging" while waiting for it, and in the meantime he sought to retrieve books that had been borrowed

from him. Among these were several he had loaned Madison during his own presidency. Suspecting that they were somewhere in the Department of State, he asked Milligan to inquire about them there. The compiler of the statutes of Virginia, William Waller Hening, was allowed to keep some of the volumes of the laws until he was through with them.<sup>37</sup> Among other delinquent borrowers were Dr. Benjamin S. Barton of Philadelphia, who had a botanical work, and George Hay of Richmond, who had a legal treatise.

He had supposed that somebody would be sent to check his books against the catalog and was prepared to make appropriate financial adjustment for the deficiencies that were to be expected. Milligan came in due course to supervise the packing, but he himself appears to have done all the checking. He was pleased to discover after a rigorous review that the losses were more than offset by accessions that were not recorded in the catalog from which Milligan made his estimate. Accordingly, he concluded that he was giving good measure.

The books were to be shipped in the pine cases which they already occupied. Generally a case was about nine feet high and consisted of three tiers of shelves with backs. These shelves were of varying depth to accommodate folios and quartos, octavos, and duodecimos as required. Since the tiers could be separated from one another and perhaps the shelves could be, the bookcases could be turned into packing cases when their fronts were covered with boards.<sup>38</sup> The covers were being prepared by workmen at Monticello, but Milligan was asked to bring paper parings to guard against jolting and sheets of paper to put between every two volumes. Books with fine bindings had to be specially wrapped, but every volume could be left in its proper place. Accordingly, all that needed to be done on arrival in Washington would be to set up the cases and remove the boards and paper.

<sup>33</sup> See accounts in Rosenberger, *Jefferson Reader*, pp. 76-85.

<sup>34</sup> Smith to TJ, February 15, 1815; TJ to Smith, February 27, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>35</sup> Act of March 3, 1815, in *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 8, 1815; Smith to TJ, March 11, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Most of the important documents are printed in Johnston's admirable account of the removal, *History of the Library*, pp. 97-104.

<sup>36</sup> See TJ to James Ogilvie, January 31, 1806, in TJ, *Writings*, ed. Ford, 8:417-19.

<sup>37</sup> TJ wrote to George Watterston, January 3, 1816, that one volume was still in Hening's hands. His correspondence with William Waller Hening, March 11-April 25, 1815, is of special interest in this connection. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>38</sup> TJ described this ingenious plan in the observations on the transportation of his library enclosed in his letter of February 27, 1815, to Smith, and in his letter of March 28 to Milligan. Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 99, 103. The bookcases that were installed at Monticello about a century and a half later were designed from these descriptions.



A few days after his seventy-second birthday Jefferson wrote the secretary of the treasury that the books were now ready for delivery and that their removal had actually begun. Therefore, he was now ready to receive payment. He asked that \$4,870 be sent John Barnes, his factor, in Georgetown (to cover his debt to Kosciuszko), \$10,500 be sent to William Short, and the balance to him personally. The treasury notes had depreciated slightly, but Short had signified his entire willingness to accept them at par value in full payment of the debt to him. Jefferson thus freed himself of the two obligations that troubled him most, and out of the rest of the payment he met others that were less pressing.<sup>39</sup>

Presumably, Milligan was then at Monticello, packing the books. Weeks before this, Joseph Dougherty, Jefferson's old coachman, had expressed his interest in their transportation. Smith and Madison arranged with him to supervise this at five dollars a day, though he claimed that this would do little more than cover his expenses. Learning of Jefferson's plan to leave for Poplar Forest as soon as the books were packed, Dougherty was afraid he would miss seeing his old employer, but that gentleman remained at Monticello until the last and tenth wagon had set out. About the same time Jefferson learned that seven wagons had crossed the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg, but not until midsummer, after he had made a trip to Poplar Forest, did he receive a report of the arrival of all the wagons in Washington. By that time Milligan had unpacked the books and found them entirely uninjured.<sup>40</sup> The room provided for them was large enough, he believed. There was more space for the library at the capital than at Monticello, and it could perform a larger service there. When reporting to Smith the pending departure of the last portion of his library, Jefferson said: "It is the choicest collection of books in the United States, and I hope it will not be without some general effect on the literature of our country."

<sup>39</sup> TJ to Alexander J. Dallas, April 18, 1815, in TJ, *Writings*, ed. Ford, 9:514-15; TJ's receipt to Treasury, April 23, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress; William Short to TJ, March 11, 1815, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 7th ser., vol. 1, *The Jefferson Papers* (Boston: Published by the Society, 1900), pp. 227-30.

<sup>40</sup> TJ to Samuel H. Smith, May 8, 1815; Milligan to TJ, May 6, July 31, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

With the books Jefferson sent the catalog which had guided him in their arrangement. He might have done this even if the person who was to have charge of them had not requested it. Formerly the clerk of the House of Representatives had served as part-time librarian, but a full-time position had been recently created and to this George Watterston had been appointed. Toward the end of April, somewhat apologetically, he asked Jefferson's advice about arrangement. In his reply Jefferson dealt chiefly with practical matters rather than with theoretical considerations, but he cast much light on his catalog and on himself as a cataloger.<sup>41</sup>

Two methods of classification offered themselves, he said—the alphabetical and that by subject. Finding the former unsatisfactory, he had adopted the latter, while recognizing that it presented difficulties. A library shelved in strict alphabetical order, by authors or by titles, would indeed present a "medley" to the mind, as he observed. And anyone who has had access to the stacks of a modern library can recognize the convenience of having books on a particular subject close together. A recent librarian, who attached that designation to Jefferson, observed that he had "a perfect passion for the systematic and orderly arrangement of data so as to make it most readily available for actual use."<sup>42</sup> Being concerned for the accessibility as well as the systematic arrangement of books, he had supplemented his subject catalog with an alphabetical list of authors' names with references to the numbered labels he had pasted on his books.

He saved Watterston a vast amount of time and labor, but he presented that Librarian with a fait accompli. One reason why his general system was continued until almost the end of the century doubtless was that successive Librarians of Congress did not know how to get out of it. He himself made no attempt to justify it on principle at that stage. He contented him with saying that he took the basis of distribution from "Lord Bacon's

<sup>41</sup> Watterston's letter of April 26, 1815, and TJ's answer of May 7 can both be seen in Johnston, *History of the Library*, pp. 141-45.

<sup>42</sup> Randolph G. Adams, in *Three Americanists* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), p. 72. The title of chap. 3 of this work is "Thomas Jefferson, Librarian."



table of science, modifying it to the changes in scientific pursuits which have taken place since his time, and to the greater or less extent of reading in the science which I proposed to myself."

His "system" of classification was based on the division of the faculties of the mind into memory, reason, and imagination and the corresponding division of human knowledge into history, philosophy, and the fine arts. Toward the end of his life he said that the "origination of this division" was actually with the abbé de Charron. Nonetheless he himself appears to have derived the idea from Bacon, whom he listed with Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke in his trinity of immortals. The table that was presented by him, however, was even closer to that of Jean d'Alembert, who elaborated somewhat on Bacon's in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

He used the terminology of his own era, not that of ours. To him the word "science" meant knowledge, and what we now call science was designated by him as natural history or natural philosophy. Like Bacon and d'Alembert, he placed civil and natural history in the same division and listed physics and astronomy under philosophy. He went considerably beyond these predecessors in the number of subdivisions and arranged them somewhat differently. One of the most distinctive of his additions was "gardening," which he classified among the fine arts and placed just after architecture. Unlike earlier classifiers, he was using his table as a guide in the arrangement of his books. Accordingly, he assigned a chapter number to each subdivision. Ancient history was number one, botany was thirteen, geography twenty-nine, music thirty-two; and there were forty-four chapters altogether.

<sup>43</sup> TJ's table can be seen in the front matter of Sowerby, *Catalogue*, vol. 1. He referred to Charron's treatise *La Sagesse* (1601) in his letter of March 24, 1824, to Judge Augustus B. Woodward, in TJ, *Writings*, ed. Lipscomb and Bergh, 16:17. Apparently he was relying on his memory, for he incorrectly dated Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605). The table of d'Alembert, to which he did not refer here and may have forgotten, appeared in *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie* (1751). It is printed along with those of Bacon and TJ by Leo E. LaMontagne in *American Library Classification, with Special Reference to the Library of Congress* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1961), pp. 36-39. Chap. 2 of this authoritative work deals with TJ as a classifier.

His classification was not a complete innovation. The most recent catalog of the Congressional Library (1812), following that of the Library Company of Philadelphia, was based on Bacon-d'Alembert tabulations of knowledge.<sup>44</sup> Jefferson's classification was much more extensive, however, and it marked a notable advance in what came to be called library science. It received some criticism at the time on theoretical grounds, and it unquestionably reflected its author's personal tastes and interests. He himself recognized that he had a disproportionate number of subdivisions in the field of law, and his classification of religion under the head of jurisprudence strikes one as downright capricious.<sup>45</sup> In the printed catalog of 1815, Watterston, seeking to provide a useful guide, arranged the titles alphabetically within the chapters. This was a departure from Jefferson's own unprinted catalog that was not liked by him, but there was no important change in his classification until after his death. In 1830 new subdivisions were added, as they continued to be until the end of the century, when an entirely new classification was adopted.<sup>46</sup>

If, somehow, he could be informed of later developments, he would probably be surprised that his basic system was not superseded sooner. He himself modified it in connection with the library of the University of Virginia, grouping subjects according to professorships. He was no rigid theorist in the world of books, if indeed he was in any field, and he fully recognized the inevitability of change in human affairs. A scheme of classification that sufficed for a library of 6,500 volumes could not have been expected to meet the needs of 750,000. Not even he expected the vast proliferation of knowledge during the rest of the nineteenth century, not to mention that of the twentieth.

<sup>44</sup> LaMontagne, *American Library Classification*, p. 45, listing eighteen classes. He is uncertain whether this was chiefly owing to the part-time librarian, Patrick Magruder, or to Samuel Latham Mitchill, a member of the Library Committee. The latter, who knew TJ well over a long period, might have picked up the idea from him.

<sup>45</sup> His system was criticized at the time by Augustus B. Woodward, who advanced his own scheme of universal knowledge. See LaMontagne, *American Library Classification*, pp. 40-43, and TJ's letter to Woodward, March 24, 1824. TJ, *Writings*, ed. Lipscomb and Bergh, 16:17-20.

<sup>46</sup> Developments are described by LaMontagne in *American Library Classification*, chap. 3.



Fortunately he did not know that most of the books he sold the government would be destroyed by fire in 1851. A couple of thousand of them remain in the Library of Congress as cherished treasures. If they could be identified in no other way, they can be from his characteristic bookmark. Before the signature "I" (there was then no "J"), he wrote the letter "T", and after the signature "T" he wrote the letter "J". On the shelves of one of the world's largest libraries these old books of his are a tiny fraction, but in some sense he may be said to have put his stamp on the entire collection. His catalog may now seem archaic, but, as has been suggested, he might well be termed the "Father of American Librarianship."<sup>47</sup> Few wonders of the modern world would delight him more than the card catalog, and in any great library he would soon make himself at home.

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<sup>47</sup> Adams, *Three Americanists*, p. 95.

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D.M.

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# Thomas Jefferson and the Library of Congress